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*Published in:*  
EPRINTS-BOOK-TITLE

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*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2002

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Wagenaar, H. (2002). It will not be taken away from Her: An interpretation of Luke 10. In *EPRINTS-BOOK-TITLE*

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**Hinne Wagenaar.**

## **It will not be taken away from her.**

**An Interpretation of Luke 10:38-42<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. Introduction**

When I had just arrived in Cameroon in 1998, I happened to hear a sermon, in one of the parishes of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, on the passage of Martha and Mary as recorded in Luke 10: 38-42.<sup>2</sup> The pastor followed a quite traditional pattern of exegesis and consequently the message was pretty harsh for the women in that congregation who, of course, outnumbered the men by far. Summarized, the message was as follows:

In this passage we hear of two women who meet Jesus. Both relate in their own way to the Lord. Martha is very welcoming and receives Jesus in her house. And Mary listens to the words the Lord speaks. Now Martha is very concerned about all the practical and organizational business. She is not able to sit down and listen to the word of salvation. She is a typical woman, a busybody, who has no time for the real things in life. Busy with cooking, and no time to pray. Busy with the household, and no time to read scripture. Busy with farming and no time to come to the church meetings. Mary is the wonderful example for women. The Lord had to rebuke Martha and to recommend Mary. She has taken the better part. She is concerned about Christian life. She knows what is of importance and is able to leave the rest. She is concerned with the issues of eternal life. Let us emulate her example!

When I had heard this sermon I felt, even as a man, pretty bad. You should imagine these women in rural Cameroon. They have to toil on the farms in order to feed their families. They struggle to keep their families together in the worries and conflicts of everyday life. And besides, they form the backbone of the church! And then on Sunday you get condemned by a male pastor, who preaches that Jesus wants you to think more of the spiritual aspects of life! Based on this experience, I decided to read this passage with my students in class. We had quite heated debates as to the exegesis of this text. And it was quite interesting to see that both male and female voices were mixed in their opinions. Many of our female students were surprised about the strength of this text. This article is, therefore, dedicated to the 23 female

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<sup>1</sup> This article has also been published in *African Challenge-All Africa Journal of Theology*, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> For the English text of Luke 10: 38-42 I have used the New International Version of the Bible.

students who were enrolled in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary during the period I taught in this institution (1998-2002).

While I was screening commentaries and books on Luke 10: 38-42, I became aware that, in general, there are three approaches to this text:

- (a) Interpretations which do not explicitly identify this text as a text about women.
- (b) Interpretations which acknowledge that this text is encouraging for the position of women in the church, but do not further elaborate.
- (c) Interpretations which do analyse the text from a specific women's perspective, but conclude that it is a sad passage for women.

In this article I envision to go beyond these positions. I certainly want to go beyond the traditional exegesis (a) of this text. But I also want to defy an approach of some feminist theologians who attest that this passage is a sad passage for women (c), because Luke portrays a struggle of sister against sister and because both Martha and Mary are being pictured in a way which is not empowering for women. I will try to develop position (b) more deeply while using insights from positions (a) and (c). I hope to establish an interpretation in which this passage may become an inspiration for a 'discipleship of equals'.<sup>3</sup>

In the following, I firstly want to screen the 3 positions given above. Thereafter I will embark on an alternative interpretation.

## **2. Three approaches to Luke 10: 38-42.**

a.

Several of the commentaries do not read the text from a specifically women's perspective. They generally tend to read the text in relation to the passage of the Good Samaritan which precedes the passage of Martha and Mary (Luke 10: 25-37). The passage of the Good Samaritan concentrates on active (horizontal) discipleship, while the passage on Martha and Mary stresses the listening to the word of God (the vertical aspect of the love of God). Most do not want to state that a life of quiet worship and contemplation is better than an active life of Christian service. But despite that N. Geldenhuys insists that 'the most important part of

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<sup>3</sup> This term is used by E. Schüssler Fiorenza in her book *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: SCM Press, 1994), especially in the pages 97-241. It reappears e.g. in the title of a collection of her articles of the period 1964-1991: E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1993).

our religion is the spiritual exercise of communion with our Redeemer.’<sup>4</sup> J. Nolland writes in a similar manner that ‘Martha has been seduced away (by practical affairs of life) from the kind of trustful preoccupation with the kingdom of God that should be the orientation of a faithful disciple.’<sup>5</sup> A. Plummer agrees that ‘mere benevolence such as that of the Samaritan is not enough. It must be united with, and founded upon, habitual communion with the Divine.’<sup>6</sup> And, finally, W. Barclay analyses the text as a clash of temperaments, of which the kindness of Martha is of the wrong type.<sup>7</sup>

The main problem with these interpretations, like the example given in the introduction, is that women are being blamed for doing what they are expected to do. First they are forced and drilled by the society into certain roles, with serious repercussions for those who deviate from those roles. And subsequently in church they are told that they give too much attention to these roles to the detriment of their spiritual lives, without offering a way or chance to escape from these fetters of society. This leaves women in a serious fix, in which they never attain the good life. In short: women are supposed to fulfil certain duties and when they do them, they are rebuked for doing them!

b.

Most of the less conservative commentaries, however, do recognize the importance of this text for women. They mention the special behaviour of Jesus towards women. E. Schweizer writes: ‘What is mentioned of Martha as mistress of the house who invites men, is quite unthinkable in Palestine’ and ‘Women sit at Jesus’ feet, while no real rabbi taught women.’<sup>8</sup> I. Howard Marshall observes the same: ‘It is significant that Jesus encourages a woman to learn

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<sup>4</sup> N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English text with Introduction and Exposition and Notes*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), 316.

<sup>5</sup> J. Nolland, *Luke 9:21 - 18:34*. Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 602.

<sup>6</sup> A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke*. (5th ed.) The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 290.

<sup>7</sup> W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*. (rev. ed.) The Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 142.

<sup>8</sup> E. Schweizer, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*. Das Neue Testament Deutsch, band 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 124. (my translation from the German).

from him, since the Jewish teachers were generally opposed to this'<sup>9</sup> and adds 'for a Jewish audience it would be of great significance that a place was given to women by Jesus not simply to do domestic duties in the church but to listen and learn.'<sup>10</sup> And again, J.A. Fitzmyer confirms that 'Jesus rather encourages women to learn from him; contrast the attitude of the sages in later Rabbinic tradition.'<sup>11</sup>

Though I do appreciate these attempts in acknowledging this passage as important to women, they leave us nearly with empty hands. All of these mentioned here are continuing the exegesis of those mentioned under a. They only add these remarks about the special behaviour of Jesus, but they do not reflect any further on the implications, either for the interpretation of the Gospel of Luke, or for the position of women in church and society.

c.

Finally, there are those commentators who read this passage very much from the perspective of women, but conclude that it is not an empowering story for them. It seems that several feminist theologians have been disappointed by the theology of Luke. For long Luke has had the reputation of being a friend to women. But after a more careful investigation, they find that

women are often present as themes in or passive recipients of Jesus' teaching, and as objects of his healing. They are voiceless learners, remaining in the background in supporting roles. They serve in the margins, embodying what is identified as the lifestyle of discipleship, but at the same time, they are given no leadership or responsibility in the community formed around Jesus. In the end, then, Luke's Gospel seems to legitimize male dominance rather than standing as a manifesto for women's affirmation and leadership... The picture is a sad one for many women who feel we have lost a potential ally in Luke and his Gospel.<sup>12</sup>

I have quoted S. Ringe at some length, because she seems to express the feelings of a good deal of feminist theologians. J. Schaberg in her analysis of the Gospel of Luke voices her grudge in such a way:

The Gospel of Luke is an extremely dangerous text... Even as this Gospel highlights women as included among the followers of Jesus, subjects of his

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<sup>9</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), 452.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 451.

<sup>11</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel according to Luke (X-XXIV): Introduction, Translation and Notes*. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 28A (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 892.

<sup>12</sup> S. H. Ringe, *Luke*. Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 11-12.

teaching and objects of his healing, it deftly portrays them as models of subordinate service, excluded from the power center of the movement and from significant responsibilities.<sup>13</sup>

One of the main reasons for being disappointed in Luke relates to his account of the resurrection. In his account Luke gives a minor role to women as witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, contrary to the other 3 gospels. E. Schüssler Fiorenza outlines that 'Luke's androcentric redaction attempts in a subtle way to disqualify the women as resurrection witnesses.'<sup>14</sup>

This general approach to the Gospel of Luke also seems to heavily influence the evaluation and interpretation of Luke 10: 38-42.<sup>15</sup> From the commentary of J. Nolland we may deduce that Schüssler Fiorenza has stated that this passage is designed to restrict women. Martha is silenced, while Mary remains silent.<sup>16</sup> S. Ringe similarly portrays the sisters: 'Martha is held up to ridicule... Mary simply listens and nothing more.'<sup>17</sup> Martha receives rebuke for the hospitality she offers to Jesus instead of blessing. Mary remains a silent learner and gets no commission to preach.<sup>18</sup> Schaberg observes that this story 'pits sister against sister',<sup>19</sup> while the Johannine Martha and Mary have more significant and powerful roles than the Lukan Martha and Mary.<sup>20</sup> G. Paterson expresses the pain of today's feminist theologians, when she writes an imaginary window on this passage, in which she shows how astonished Martha and Mary were when they read Luke's Gospel in old age:

I mean, Luke has set us both up. Women are either housekeepers without a theological idea in their heads, or else they are silent and adoring

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<sup>13</sup> J. Schaberg, "Luke" in C.A. Newson and S.H. Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary: expanded edition with Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 363.

<sup>14</sup> E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logos of Liberation* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1993), 163.

<sup>15</sup> Due to limited library facilities at my disposal, I have not been able to consult some of the articles written by E. Schüssler Fiorenza on Luke 10: 38-42. But the views I will present here all draw from her writings.

<sup>16</sup> J. Nolland, *Luke 9:21 - 18:34*, 603.

<sup>17</sup> S. H. Ringe, *Luke*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>19</sup> J. Schaberg, "Luke", 376.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

audience for a male teacher.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Towards an alternative approach.

#### a. The Jewish tradition.

When we want to understand a text, we will always need to consider the context out of which the text emerged. This context is, however, not only the context in which Jesus lived, but also the context in which Luke was working and compiling his gospel. This implies that Luke may have had other interests than the material he is working with. In Luke 10: 38-42 we are dealing with exclusive Lukan material, though there is some resemblance with the material we find in the Gospel of John.

The approach mentioned under 2 a. above hardly ventures into specifics concerning the context, in this case into issues of the position of women in Jesus' time. Surprisingly, the feminist approach 2 c. also gives sparse attention to it, though normally we would expect its exponents to venture seriously into the issue. One of the reasons may be that, according to them, it is not politically correct to downplay the Jewish tradition. Some warn that we should not portray Jesus as very radical by depicting the Jewish tradition as negatively as possible, because this would foster Christian antisemitism. Besides, I find that some feminist theologians have the tendency to compare the implications of this passage with their own context and positions, instead of with the Jewish 1<sup>st</sup> century context. In such a case they may sometimes be disappointed, as they all write from a Western and relatively comfortable perspective. Reading this passage from a more or less traditional society, like that of Cameroon, makes it easier to appreciate its subversive character.

I am of the opinion that we must take the gender situation carefully into account. Firstly, we must not forget that we deal with a traditional society in which there is a strict separation of male and female life. Men were not supposed to talk and interfere with women. When Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman, the disciples are not surprised to find him talking to a Samaritan, but talking with a woman! (John 4:27) J. Jeremias warns against easy generalizations, but informs us that women were expected to remain unobserved in public; that it was suitable for women to stay indoors and live in retirement; that their education was generally limited to learning domestic arts; that a daughter had none of the brother's rights

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<sup>21</sup> G. Paterson, *Still Flowing: Women, God and Church*. Risk Book Series, No. 86 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 101-102.

and thus was not entitled to possessions; that women were handed down from the father's power to the husband's, and in case of widowhood, handed down to the power of a brother of the husband.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, from a religious point of view, especially with regard to the Torah, a woman was inferior to a man. In Temple and Synagogue, men and women were strictly separated, while women had no official role to play in public worship. Women should not be taught the Torah, according to certain rabbi's. Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, in the daily prayer Jewish men prayed: 'Praised be God that he has not created me a gentile; praised be God that he has not created me a woman; praised be God that he has not created me an ignorant man.'<sup>24</sup> The position of women can be summed up with the constantly repeated formula in religious legislation: 'women, slaves and children.'<sup>25</sup>

From this perspective, our passage of Luke 10 is quite extraordinary. Martha takes the freedom to invite Jesus into *her house*. And Jesus accepts the invitation, though this would have been a very dubious thing to do in the Jewish tradition. We start wondering why Luke writes about Martha inviting Jesus into her house? What is his interest in portraying women as having their own means? Also in chapter 8:3 Luke portrays women as helping to support the Jesus movement. We could downplay that to subservient roles, but we could also see a reversal of the order in which men only provide for women! In our passage, moreover, Luke does not mention anything about husbands, fathers or brothers. Martha invited Jesus and Jesus accepted the invitation! Moreover, to see Mary sit at the feet of Jesus must be noted as very remarkable. In two other places in the New Testament people sit at the feet (pros tous podas: at the feet) of a master. The healed demon possessed man sits at Jesus' feet (Luke 8:35). Saul sat at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). This 'sitting at the feet' clearly implies a position of learning while being a disciple. In this text, Mary is allowed and encouraged to sit at Jesus' feet, a symbol having far more implications than just being allowed to listen to the word of God. No, Mary is allowed to sit in the inner core and become part of the intimate friends of

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<sup>22</sup> J. Jeremias, "The Social Position of Women" in *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period*, (Philidelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 357-376.

<sup>23</sup> L. Swidler, "Jesus was a Feminist" in K. Aman, *Border Regions of Faith: An Anthology of Religion and Social Change* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 30-31.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>25</sup> J. Jeremias, "The Social Position of Women", 375.



Jesus. It clearly shows the extraordinary place of women in the Jesus movement. Jesus granted Mary a position which was denied to her by tradition.

By opposing Jesus' position to the Jewish tradition, I am not intending to blame that tradition. Nor do I want to deepen the anti-Judaism of the Christian church. Firstly, because I do not think other cultures and traditions were much different from the Jewish tradition, though there may have been differences in the higher circles of the Roman and, to a lesser extent, Jewish society. Secondly, I consider the Jesus movement as an inner Jewish phenomenon, not of Christianity over against Judaism. And so, while portraying a negative picture on the position of women in Jewish society, we are equally thankful for the inner strength of the Jewish tradition to bring forth such liberating movements!<sup>26</sup> I agree with E. Schüssler Fiorenza when she writes:

Only when we place the Jesus stories about women into the overall story of Jesus and his movement in Palestine are we able to recognize their subversive character. In the discipleship of equals the 'role' of women is not peripheral or trivial, but at the center, and thus of utmost importance to the praxis of 'solidarity from below'.<sup>27</sup>

#### **b. Martha, the voice of tradition.**

It is by far not enough, however, just to recognize the astonishing freedom which is taken in this passage by Martha and Mary and which is confirmed by Jesus. I believe that we need to dig at yet another level. Most commentators block this further way, as they assume that Jesus rebukes Martha because of her being so busy with food and hospitality. I consider this not to be correct, though the text seems to suggest it. In verse 41 Jesus is given two words for expressing his opinion about Martha: 'merimnas' (you are worried) and 'thorubazè' (you are upset/ making an uproar). Jesus uses two distinct words to disclose Martha's grievance about many things (polla: much). This can hardly be expressed in such a strong way when meaning that Martha was overwhelmed by domestic issues and hospitality. It would also underestimate the ability of these women to manage their household properly, even in a situation of having many unexpected visitors. Besides, that would then have been only one issue. Jesus mentions that she is upset about many things. No, this passage has little to do with a domestic conflict between the two sisters. Martha does not just need a helping hand in the kitchen, she tells her

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<sup>26</sup> See for this discussion: E. Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Jesus Movement as Renewal Movement Within Judaism" in *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: SCM Press, 1994), 105-154.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 152.

sister that she ought not to sit at the feet of Jesus! It is not her place to sit among the male disciples; her place is with her in the kitchen, on the serving side. Martha expresses the voice of the tradition, which would not allow Mary to sit there. Perhaps she is shocked by the consequences of her own liberal behaviour in inviting Jesus into her house. She had not intended her sister to scandalize the Jewish tradition and religion, nor to scandalize Jesus, nor to scandalize her house. She is worried and making a public uproar about this unruly and impious behaviour of her sister.

If Martha had needed a helping hand, she would not have needed to include Jesus in the discussion. She simply would have called her sister herself. But now Luke portrays a situation in which Jesus is asked and forced to take position. Is it allowed for Mary to sit there at that central place? Can she be an intimate disciple? And in the narrative, Martha is very certain of her case. Of course, Jesus will say 'No way Mary, this is not your place. Help your sister. You are not supposed to break the rules.' But to Martha's dismay, Jesus does not give in to the request by supporting the Jewish tradition. On the contrary, he explicitly and publicly expresses that 'only one thing is needed' and that 'Mary has chosen what is better.' (vs. 42) He confirms the position which Mary has chosen! Of course, this has nothing to do with food anymore, like some commentaries suggest that one dish is enough. Over against Martha's many worries (not only concerning food, but the protection of the tradition!) Jesus places one necessity, namely equality. Mary should remain seated at his feet; all, male and female, should listen to his words; all should listen to the word of God and be properly taught; all have an equal footing in his movement.

### **c. Sister against sister?**

In the history of interpretation of our passage, Martha and Mary are, of course, always played off against each other. The text also seems to invite us to do so: Martha has chosen the wrong thing, while Mary has chosen the better part. The sisters are divided. This is one of the reasons why feminist theologians are not very happy with this passage. Men are easily able to use the passage for their divide and rule policy. I do understand this pain which women experience. For once, we have a passage about women in the Bible and then these women are being portrayed as being against each other.

Most commentaries jump, for their actual understanding and application, on this difference between the sisters. According to them, two different attitudes of life and faith are expressed through these two sisters: active life over against contemplative life; commitment to the present world over against dedication to the world to come; Judaism over against

Christianity; justification by works over against justification by faith; diaconal work (the Greek text uses for Martha's work the word 'diakonia') over against preaching. But usually the commentators do not want to take the full consequences of this exegesis. They are quick in explaining that Jesus does not disapprove of active life and serving commitment. It is indeed only the revered tradition of monasticism that takes this interpretation seriously to the end and reads this text as an approval of the contemplative life. Thomas Merton writes in an early work: 'Optimam partem elegit. She has chosen the best part, i.e. the contemplative life.'<sup>28</sup>

According to my alternative interpretation which I am trying to develop in this article, however, Jesus is not rebuking Martha for her active life of service. And I disagree with the exegesis of Ringe who states that 'Martha is blamed for what she would have been expected to do in her society.'<sup>29</sup> It is not a choice between active and contemplative life. The conflict is between the role and position of women in the Jesus movement over against the position of women in the Jewish tradition. Jesus pronounces, in an way which is hardly open for misinterpretation, that Martha cannot force Mary into the traditional model. He confirms Mary in the choice she has made. Mary has chosen the better part, i.e. she has chosen the freedom to take a position close at the feet of Jesus and she is confident in listening to what is important in (religious) life. She doesn't need to speak. Her behaviour reveals more than words can express. This does not imply that Martha's behaviour of service is worse or inferior. No, the worse part relates to the worries she has about the traditional position of women and the uproar she makes concerning Mary's unconventional choice.

Here women do not need to feel bad that works of serving the family and hospitality are of inferior quality to hearing the word of God. This passage, indeed, pits sister against sister. But it is not a quarrel concerning domestic activities, it is a fundamental quarrel concerning the position of women in the Jesus movement. I am afraid that the ideal of sisterhood is not achieved here. Luke shows, quite realistically, that women sometimes put up great hindrances themselves against the changes of their position in church and society. Quite often we see that marginalised people internalize their oppression in such a way that they vehemently protest against such changes.

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<sup>28</sup> T. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Sheldon Press, 1953), 58.

<sup>29</sup> S. H. Ringe, *Luke*, 161.

#### **d. Parallelism between ‘The Good Samaritan’ and ‘Martha and Mary’.**

Instead of playing the sisters off against each other, it might be better to return to one of the options made by the more traditional interpreters as mentioned under 2 a. They tend to relate the preceding passage of the Good Samaritan to this passage on Martha and Mary as parallel passages which should be read alongside one another. I want to follow that line of thought.

The passage of the Good Samaritan is (also) a most remarkable one. An expert in the Law, a religious insider, asks the question of how to inherit eternal life. Jesus refers him back to the law and makes him give the answer himself through the great commandment. He is sent away with the message: do this and you will live. (vs. 28) Jesus relates eternal life to living the commandments in ordinary life. But the expert did not want to be dismissed with such a practical and simple solution, and asks ‘and who is my neighbour?’ (vs. 29) Jesus, being pushed to clarity, then tells an extraordinary story in which he criticizes the religious elite very seriously, both priest and Levite. As a good alternative he features a Samaritan who takes care of his neighbour in a correct and humane manner. Here it is important to note that Samaritans were utterly despised by the Jews. They were considered both ethnically impure and religiously degenerate. The tensions between Jews and Samaritans were very considerable in the first century<sup>30</sup> and may be summarized by the comment in the passage on the Samaritan woman in John 4: 9: ‘For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.’ Now Jesus is giving the expert in the Law the example of this Samaritan as good behaviour to emulate: ‘Go and do likewise.’ (vs. 37) It must have been utterly embarrassing. In this passage the religious professional is being rebuked and challenged to do something like what the Samaritan does in the story, while Jesus seems to open his movement for Samaritans, those who were rejected by the tradition.

Now the parallelism lies in the fact that, in the passage about Martha and Mary, Mary sits at the feet of the Lord and tries to learn, to become ‘an expert in the law’. However, she is not being rebuked into doing something (as Martha wants her to be) but she is being confirmed in her sitting down and listening. This woman, who ought not to sit at that place according to tradition, is accepted by Jesus and allowed to listen, to learn, and to think about the central issues of life and faith. In the parallelism of these two passages Jesus turns things upside down. The male religious professional is criticized and challenged to perform diaconal works. The outsiders and the rejected, a Samaritan and a woman, are being placed in the

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<sup>30</sup> J. Jeremias, “The Samaritans” in *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 352-358.

centre. The woman Mary is not forced to do something, to do diaconal work. Not because Jesus is favouring contemplation above active service. No, that is not the case. For Jesus, it depends on the person to whom he is talking. The man skilled in scripture is given the example of the Samaritan and challenged to engage in active service, while the woman actively serving (Martha) is given the example of Mary, sitting at the feet of the Lord and contemplating his words. In this way Luke portrays Jesus as challenging the status quo.

#### **4. It will not be taken away from her.**

When we browse through the titles and headings in commentaries and periodicals concerning this passage concerning Martha and Mary, we see that most titles are geared towards two topics, namely 'one thing is necessary' and 'choosing the better part'. No title is actually related to the last sentence of the passage, and in hardly any of the commentaries is much attention given to the words 'and it will not be taken away from her' (vs. 42)

Earlier in the article I stated that we have to consider both the context in which Jesus was actually living and in which Luke is portraying Jesus, and the context in which this text has come into existence. Luke is writing this passage in his own context and uses the material, at his disposal, to meet the needs of his community. Of course, we cannot possibly distinguish in detail between those two levels. But there can hardly be any doubt that Luke is responding with this passage to a discussion, or to tensions which have occurred concerning the role and position of women in the church. Luke, with this objective, compiles the extremely short and compact story about Martha and Mary. And he demonstrates that Jesus himself confirmed the position of Mary at the centre of discipleship and leadership. And apparently there was need to stress it with great emphasis. I consider the sentence 'and it will not be taken away from her', as the main sentence of the passage. Evidently the forces against women sitting at the feet of Jesus, sitting in the centre, were threatening in such a way that Jesus' words needed to be positioned with such strength at the end of this passage. I already stated earlier that this sentence is hardly open to misunderstanding. Jesus confirms, in the strongest possible way, that this position of Mary shall not be taken away from her; that women belong to the centre of the movement; that women are supposed to share in leadership. And I would add in the light of today's discussion that women cannot be denied any role or position in the church. Including full ordination into the ministry of word and sacrament, including being a bishop, pope, patriarch or moderator of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. How bitter it is to

read the history of the Christian Church and to witness that the Church has done precisely the opposite by 'taking it away from her'.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article I have tried to go beyond the more traditional interpretations as well as beyond the quite critical, and sometimes negative, stand of Feminist theologians on this passage. I hope to have shown the revolutionary potential when read in the context of a (Jewish) traditional society. I have experienced myself that this passage functions like that among some female pastors and students in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon.<sup>31</sup>

Though I see with some Feminist theologians that Luke himself, despite the passage on Martha and Mary, seems to be careful with portraying women in the centre of leadership positions in the early church, I am not ready to characterize Luke as an exclusively male-centred gospel.<sup>32</sup> This passage of Martha and Mary shows something different. Together with e.g. Luke 13: 10-17, where a woman bent with a spinal disease for eighteen year is being called 'daughter of Abraham', an expression nowhere found in ancient Jewish literature<sup>33</sup>, and together with the passage of Luke 11: 27-28, in which a woman cries out to Jesus 'blessed is the woman who gave you birth and the breasts that nursed you', in which she expresses that the value of a woman lies in bearing a male child and living out through him her ambitions, and to which Jesus responds that 'blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it' implying that a woman is more than womb and breasts<sup>34</sup>, we may assume that the Gospel of Luke has a revolutionary potential. Not only for including women into the equality of discipleship, but equally in including everybody, despite race, tribe, gender and even religion (as the passage of the Good Samaritan reveals), into the discipleship of equals.

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<sup>31</sup> See: Rev. Tache Florence, *Jesus the Liberator: a Feminist Perspective*. B.Th thesis, defended at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 2001. Chapter two entails an exegesis of Luke: 10: 38-42.

<sup>32</sup> See for further discussion the article of J. Schaberg on Luke in the *Women's Bible Commentary*. (see note 10)

<sup>33</sup> See: W. Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 70.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 72.